

House Group Moving To Probe Birch Society

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Chairman Walter of the House Un-American Activities Committee said today he has ordered a preliminary investigation of the activities of the John Birch Society, the controversial anti-Communist organization.

The investigation was requested earlier today by Representative Hiestand, Republican of California, a member of the society. Mr. Hiestand said he was sure an honest inquiry would dispel charges that the society is a "dictatorial, Fascist" organization.

Mr. Walter said the purpose of the preliminary investigation was to determine whether his committee has jurisdiction. Noting that its legislative charter limits its inquiries to the diffusion of propaganda attacking the principle or form of the United States Government, Mr. Walter said, "I don't see from the press reports anything this society has done that would bring it within the purview of this committee."

Reuss Backs Inquiry

Representative Reuss, Democrat of Wisconsin, said today he also has requested an investigation as a result of numerous letters he said he received attacking Chief Justice Warren.

He reported that many of the letters were mimeographed and followed the same general line but usually did not identify the writers as members of the John Birch Society.

In a letter to Chairman Walter, Mr. Reuss said he believed the letters he has received originated with the society. He said propaganda organizations have



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a right to express their opinions, but that in this instance there should be an investigation to determine "who is behind these activities, how they are financed and how they are carried on."

Mr. Hiestand became the first member of Congress to disclose his membership in the semi-secret society today when he was asked about a letter he sent a number of fellow Congressmen yesterday, urging them to make no attack on the society "until you know the facts."

Mr. Hiestand told an interviewer he had joined the group in California "quite a while back." He said, "I'm quite sure there are other members of Congress who are also members of the society." But he said he believed each should have the right to decide for himself whether to reveal his membership.

The Congressman said he was prompted to send his cautionary note to his colleagues yesterday because "a member of the other body (the Senate) has been putting a lot of stuff in the Congressional Record that is simply not accurate."

Mr. Hiestand declined to identify the Senator of whom he spoke. Senator Milton E. Young, Republican of North Dakota, early this month began speaking in the Senate against the Birch Society.

He charged that the society was dangerous to democracy because it conducted semi-secret operations and harassing tactics against public officials and private citizens with whose views it disagreed.

Mr. Hiestand said he thought an investigation of the Birch Society by the House committee would put these charges to rest. He confirmed that members of the society have engaged in letter writing campaigns to Congress and to other public officials, but denied that the society condones secret measure tactics.

The Californian blamed the charges on an inaccurate story that first appeared in what he called a "California Communist publication" and said members of Congress should beware of echoing accusations whose origin they do not understand.

Won't Take Fifth

Mr. Hiestand said he was sure that if members of the Birch Society are called before a congressional committee "none of them will take the Fifth Amendment. I know these birds pretty well and they're rugged individualists, intensely anti-Communist and intensely patriotic. It would be a good thing to hear their story from the members themselves."

Wrote to Welch

Mr. Hiestand said that no individual in the society is charged to carry out any activities that violate his own conscience. "I don't endorse absolutely everything the society stands for," he said, "but the big 98 per cent of its program is intense patriotism and anti-Communism."

As for the charges against Mr. Eisenhower and other high Republican officials, Mr. Hiestand said, "some of these were taken out of context. They were made by the founder (Mr. Welch) some years ago, before the society was founded, in a circular letter that was not for general distribution and was supposed to be confidential."

He said they were being dredged up now in an effort to destroy the organization in public opinion. "When an anti-Communist group begins to hurt," Mr. Hiestand said, "it tends to get misused."

Senator Young said today he would stand by the statements he made about the society. He noted that the documentation he supplied came "from some

of the most responsible and intelligent conservative newspapers in the country."

For the proposed investigation, Senator Young said: "I haven't suggested it, and I doubt that I will, but it's something the Democratic leadership should consider in view of the great public interest and concern with this group."

Representative Utt, another conservative Republican from California, said in an interview today that he will continue to have serious reservations about the Birch Society as long as Mr. Welch is connected with it.

Mr. Utt said the organization has some strong chapters in his district, whose members have energetically opposed communism and what they regard as dangerous and wasteful economic projects in the State and community.

Declared to Welch

Declaring that he was not a member of the society and knew of no others in Congress except Mr. Hiestand, Mr. Utt disclosed that within the last year he wrote to Mr. Welch and other society members to caution them against letting the organization "become a sort of Gerald L. K. Smith outfit."

He added, however, that society members in his district were "all reputable people, some of whom have supported me in the past." Mr. Utt said he differed with Chief Justice Warren and other Supreme Court members on many issues but thought it was "fantastic" to urge impeachment of the Chief Justice.

The John Birch Society was founded by Mr. Welch in late 1958 as an organization to combat Communist subversion in the United States. It takes its name from a 27-year-old Baptist missionary from Georgia who was an Army intelligence officer in the Far East during World War II and was killed by the Chinese Communists 10 days after V-J Day.

The organization functioned in near secrecy for a year but recently it has been the target of criticism from conservative newspapers and magazines who have charged that its tactics breed distrust of American institutions and damage the conservative cause by bringing all conservatives under suspicion.

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